



Cambodia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. Buddhism is the state religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area 67,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 13.4 million. An estimated 93 percent of the population is Hinayana, or Theravada, Buddhist. The Hinayana Buddhist tradition is widespread and strong in all provinces, with an estimated 4,100 pagodas found throughout the country. Since the vast majority of ethnic Khmer Cambodians are Buddhist, there is a close association between Buddhism, Khmer cultural traditions, and daily life. Adherence to Buddhism generally is considered intrinsic to the country's ethnic and cultural identity. The Mahayana branch of Buddhism is practiced by approximately 150,000 followers and has 63 temples throughout the country.

There are approximately 700,000 Muslims (an estimated 5 percent of the population), predominantly ethnic Chams, who generally are located in towns and rural fishing villages on the banks of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers and in Kampot Province. There are four branches of Islam represented: the Malay-influenced Shafi branch, which constitutes 88 percent of Cham Muslims; the Saudi-Kuwaiti influenced Salafi (sometimes called "Wahhabi") branch, which represents 6 percent of the Muslim population; the traditional Iman-San branch, practiced by 3 percent; and the Kadiani branch, which also represents 3 percent. There are 2,207 Muslim mosques of the 4 main branches and 270 small Surav mosques, which have congregations of up to 40 persons and do not have a Minbar from which Friday sermons are given. The small, although growing, Christian community constitutes approximately 2 percent of the population. There are an estimated 100 Christian organizations or denominations that operate freely throughout the country and include approximately 2,400 churches. However, only 900 of these churches are officially registered. Other religious organizations with small followings include the Vietnamese Cao Dai religion and the Baha'i Faith, each with an estimated 2,000 practicing members.

Foreign missionary groups, including the Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses, operate freely. They face no barriers, except for a ban on door-to-door proselytizing during the daily lunch hours of 12:00 to 2:00 p.m.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government does not tolerate abuse of religious freedom, either by governmental or private actors. However, Buddhism is the state religion. The Government promotes national Buddhist holidays, provides Buddhist training and education to monks and others in pagodas, and modestly supports an institute that performs research and publishes materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions. The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The law requires all religious groups, including Buddhist ones, to submit applications to the Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs to construct places of worship and conduct religious activities. In their applications, groups must state clearly their religious purposes and activities, which must comply with provisions forbidding religious groups from insulting other religious

groups, creating disputes, or undermining national security. However, there is no penalty for failing to register and in practice some groups do not.

In April 2005, an Islamic conference, which gathered approximately 20,000 Muslims from throughout the country and from other countries, was held in Kampong Cham Province without obtaining permission from the Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs. Organizers obtained permission only from the district level for the conference. Local and national authorities did not interfere with or sanction the organizers. Religious groups have not encountered significant difficulties in obtaining approval for construction of places of worship. No significant constraints on religious assembly were reported during the period covered by this report.

The Directive on Controlling External Religions requires registration of places of worship and religious schools, in addition to government approval prior to constructing new places of worship. Places of worship must be located at least 2 kilometers from each other and may not be used for political purposes or to house criminals or fugitives from the law. The distance limitation has begun to be enforced, but applies only to new construction of places of worship and not to offices of religious organizations. The order requires that religious teachings respect other religions.

Government officials continued to organize annual meetings for representatives of all religious groups to discuss religious developments and to address issues of concern.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Foreign missionary groups generally operated freely throughout the country and have not encountered significant difficulties in performing their work. Government officials expressed appreciation for the work of many foreign religious groups in providing much needed assistance in education, rural development, and training. However, officials also expressed some concern that foreign groups use the guise of religion to become involved in illegal or political affairs. The Um Al-qura elementary and secondary madrassah was closed by the Government in 2003 on suspicion of involvement with terrorist groups. The facility was officially reopened in September 2004 as "The Cambodian Islamic Center." On December 29, 2004, a court convicted three persons connected with the school of assisting in a planned terrorist attack on the embassy of a Western country.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

Minority religions experienced little or no societal discrimination during the period covered by this report; however, Muslims and Christians reported a few minor conflicts. The most serious incident, which occurred on April 16, 2005, involved villagers in Kampong Thom Province who accused a group of Christian boys of damaging a Buddha statue while playing in the pagoda. The police briefly detained and then released the boys for lack of evidence and calmed the villagers down, avoiding further conflict.

Occasional tensions have been reported among the branches of Islam that receive monetary support from groups in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Malaysia, or Indonesia, depending on the tenets of the branch. Some Buddhists also have expressed concern about the Cham Muslim community receiving financial assistance from foreign countries. However, in general, Cham Muslims are well-integrated into society, enjoy positions of prominence in business and the Government, and faced no reported acts of discrimination or abuse during the period covered by this report.

There are ecumenical and interfaith organizations, which often are supported by funding from foreign public or private groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy representatives met with religious leaders on these issues and contacted representatives of religious nongovernmental organizations and other groups representing the Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian faiths. The Embassy continued its Muslim outreach program, which provides for additional channels of information on the status of religious freedom in the country among the Muslim population while also providing material assistance. Through this program, the U.S.

Government gave assistance to two Islamic organizations that actively conducted human rights and democracy training in Phnom Penh and Kompong Cham Province to increase awareness of human rights within the Khmer Muslim community. In 2004, the Embassy provided small grants to three additional Muslim groups, including the Cham Muslim radio hour. The Embassy's outreach program distributed Khmer-language versions of the booklet "Muslim Life in America" throughout 10 provinces.

Released on November 8, 2005

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)